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[illegible] Five Solid Arguments for Peace

February 21, 1950

The following article by George F. Kennan, Counselor of the Department of State, appeared on the newsstands today in the March issue of The Reader's Digest with the following preface:

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Great confusion of thought prevails today with respect to American policy toward the Soviet Union and Russia's real attitude toward us. There is much loose talk going around--on both sides of the ocean--about "preventive war," "the inevitability of the conflict," and "warmongering imperialists." Let us ask, and answer, five basic questions--and see if they do not give a pretty clear answer to all this talk of war.

1. Are the Russians planning to make war on us?

Naturally, only the Soviet leaders themselves could answer this question with certainty. But the following facts are worth remembering.

It is true that Lenin wrote: "The existence of the Soviet Republic side by side with imperialist States for a long time is unthinkable. One or the other must triumph in the end. And before that end comes, a series of terrible clashes between the Soviet Republic and the bourgeois States is inevitable." And this still remains accepted Communist doctrine.

But current Communist doctrine does not demand war. On the contrary, it also teaches that eventually capitalism

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with a full theory of his own height, i.e., in terms of the inner contradictions which the Communists believe to underlie it. They see the role of Communism as one of hastening the collapse of capitalism by weakening, as a midwife, at the birth of the Socialist order. In theory, they seem inclined to regard this as primarily the task of the native Communists in each country, and not of the Soviet Red Army.

There is nothing in Stalinist doctrine which would make it necessarily the main responsibility of the armed forces of the Soviet Union themselves to overthrow capitalism everywhere by direct military action. This premise would actually seem illogical and impracticable from the Communist point of view; for it would imply that capitalism, in the absence of such an attack, would be basically sound and capable of coping permanently with its own "contradictions". And this is exactly what good Communists do not believe.

So much for doctrine. How does Russian tradition? This factor cannot be ignored; for everyone who knows the country is sure that Russia has changed Communism more than Communism has changed Russia.

Russia has a long history of expansion; but it is generally a history of a slow and cautious expansion, of a readiness to rely patiently for opportunities to extend existing borders without undue risk. Apparent exceptions, such as the Finnish War, seem to have been the results of miscalculations.

The Russians, because of the vastness of their territory and the nature of their geographic position, are landminded; and their geography leads them to a preoccupation with their land frontiers and the territories which lie just beyond them. This, on account of their technical and strategic backwardness, generally precluded them from venturing which would carry them far afield. Russian imperialism has generally been a process of nibbling, outwardly pushed by the curiosity of the executive organs of the Russian state. The experience which the present Western Communist establishes indicates that in this sense Soviet imperialism bit off more than it could comfortably chew. The resulting discomfort should make the Kremlin more wary, rather than less, about taking on much bigger bites just at this time.

Finally, we must ask ourselves whether the Soviet leaders would have reason, from the standpoint of their internal interests, to want a world war at this time.

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The modern industrial plant has also been built up the hard way. Most of it would not survive multibatively high one. But to most Russians, regardless of their attitude toward the Communist regime, it symbolizes, again, the potential road of escape from the bondage of Russian backwardness. As for the Russian Communists themselves, it is their outstanding prize and achievement. It was for this, good Communists might privately tell you, that the comfort and the freedoms of at least one generation have been sacrificed.

Now we have already seen that these physical values took a terrible beating in World War II. In these circumstances, further large-scale destruction in Russian cities or industrial communities would constitute a major tragedy from the standpoint of both the regime and the people. This is not to mention the human values: and not even the Kremlin can be oblivious to these, for men never constitutes the cadre of dictatorship as well as of bureaucracy. This is not that the men in the Kremlin, like [illegible] are tough, "couldn't care" about atomic annihilation in human wellness an [illegible] of Russian peoples.

For the Russians, then, atomic aggression would be an unmitigated and risky venture. It might produce certain momentary favorable effects, but it would also invoke formidable dangers. It would begin a war which it alone could not finish. The last two world wars stand as lessons to those who start things they can't finish, and particularly to those who attempt to conquer Europe before they have found some means of permanently neutralizing the military-industrial potential of the North American continent.

In an atomic world, total war remains a possibility, inherent in the susceptibility of men to folly. But it is now [illegible] even less of a probability than before. For it has become potentially more suicidal; and the masters of the Kremlin, in contradistinction to Hitler and the Japanese, are not suicidally inclined.

7. Is war possible?

Of course it is. and we must unfortunately always think of it as possible as long as we have the sort of world we have today. As Alexander Hamilton once wrote: "Let us recollect that peace or war will not always be left to our option; that, however moderate or unambitious we may be, we must count upon the [illegible], or hope to extinguish the ambition, of others."

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[redacted] the outside world is hostile and [redacted] to conquer it, is the maintenance [redacted] power and position of the ruling secret [redacted]. They will do everything that can be upheld that [redacted] without regard to morality. We can never be [redacted] sure that they will not already planned either [redacted] themselves and their masters that a capitalist [redacted] is imminent, in which case they might feel that [redacted] and to move in order to get the jump on their enemies, [redacted] causing those masters to make further miscalculations similar to those they have occasionally made in the past, with similar results.

(3) This analysis, like any other analysis involving the future of international affairs, may be wrong. Of [redacted] of this nature, none is fool-proof; there are only [redacted] that are more likely to be right. The author believes that his is likely to be right, or he would not have written it. But the public should bear in mind, as the author does, that he may be wrong.

There are all persons who do not regard war as [redacted]. To one of them could be cited, nor all of them together, as a valid reason for regarding war as probable at an early date.

[redacted], there, in these circumstances, must the accent of [redacted] policy lie, with respect to the Communist danger?

It must continue to lie in a vigorous and hopeful foreign policy which firmly rejects all defeatism about future war and aims at keeping alive and pursuing vigorously every possibility for solving international differences where possible (and for bearing them where solution is not yet possible) without recourse to war.

The events of the past few months have caused many [redacted] to be concerned primarily with the possibility of [redacted] attack on our own territory. But that is not the [redacted] way that our security can be menaced. If the Russian [redacted] should succeed, by means short of war, in bringing [redacted] effectively under their influence the remaining non-[redacted] countries of Europe and Asia, our security would [redacted] have suffered (but perhaps just as conceivably) irremediably [redacted] by an atomic attack on our own territory. For the [redacted] balance of power would then be turned, at least [redacted], against us.

[redacted] additional argument which has been the [redacted] through which the [redacted] would [illegible] it.

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[redacted] Soviet Government has now taken [redacted] which, because [redacted] expansive and [redacted] means of [redacted] power than aggressive war, and it is on these [redacted] the Kremlin appears to have placed the first [redacted]. There is no reason to believe that this basic [redacted] will be changed by Russia's possession of the atomic weapon.

Thus we shall have justification for hoping that by containing the political pressures known as the "cold war" the worst of our present difficulties can eventually be overcome without another great outbreak of international violence. It means that we must [redacted] to use an intelligent and helpful interest in the affairs of people everywhere to withstand the acts of subversion which are brought to bear against them by the Soviet Communist side. It means that we must continue the policy of throwing our weight into the balance wherever there is a relatively good chance that it will be effective in preventing the further expansion of the power of international Communism.

This policy has never been guaranteed to be equally successful always and everywhere. There are limits to what a democracy can do in this respect. The result depends invariably not just on what we do but on the interaction between our own policy and the natural powers of resistance which exist among the peoples affected. (No one can force a country to be free which is not itself deeply concerned for its own freedom.) Nothing that has occurred in the recent past has disproven the thesis that such a policy, if resolutely and actively pursued, provides the best chance of carrying us over the peculiar dangers of the present to a more stable and satisfactory condition of international society.

This procedure will not satisfy those impatient minds who look for some sudden or dramatic solution to the ills which now beset the international community. But these people would find it easier to reconcile themselves to this procedure if they would realize realistically on the alternatives. There are only two: (a) a return to isolation and armed neutrality, or (b) war. The first would be accompanied by a disastrous deterioration of conditions in the rest of the world. The second is something which no democratic country could make the objective of its policy.

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In attempt at "over-all settlement" with the Soviet leaders is not really an alternative. The dynamism of

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would [illegible] in a [illegible] agreement. [illegible] to the [illegible] would be worth precisely what the [illegible] at that moment. Unless the free world, including ourselves, maintained a vigorous resistance to Soviet communist political expansion wherever possibilities for such resistance presented themselves these realities would steadily deteriorate, from our standpoint, and with them the value of the agreement. Not to mention the fact that in any over-all agreement the Russians would doubtless insist on provisions which would be interpreted everywhere as an acceptance and approval on our part of the system of colonial oppression and exploitation which they have imposed upon other peoples in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

The "cold war" will not be entirely settled in our favor until those whose aims and decisions now keep the international community in a turmoil have been caused to conclude that efforts to maintain or establish political power over other peoples are detrimental to their own selfish interests and that it is inadvisable for them to pursue those efforts further. They will not be brought to this view by moral persuasion. They must come to it in their own manner in the face of a situation of fact which it is our business to help create. Until they do this, no over-all written agreement will really bind them to act as though they had.

It is evident, then, that there is no escape for us from the long hard road on which we have been advancing with a view to bringing about, by peaceful means, a happier and safer and more stable international society. This is the hardest task our country has ever undertaken. It is one unfamiliar to us by experience or tradition. But it has fallen to us by the logic of history and there is no avoiding it.

5. In what, then, does our national security really rest in this coming period?

First, our security rests in making sure that military aggression remains improbable if not impossible. We should continue to maintain a military posture which, as Theodore Roosevelt once said, will make fighting us "too expensive and dangerous a task to be undertaken lightly by anybody." Let us not be diverted from our task by a morbid preoccupation with what could possibly happen if. Let us remember that there is no security but in [illegible] for the absolute defense. Security lies in accepting [illegible] in order that [illegible] ones may be avoided."

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Second, our security rests in remembering that the ability of political resistance among our allies to Moscow Communist pressure will be deeply affected by the extent to which they continue to feel themselves secure in the military sense. Let us give those allies the assurance that we are solidly with them. At the same time, let us help them achieve, for their part, a calm and balanced understanding of the nature of their danger, so that their enemies cannot play on false fears.

Third, our security rests in keeping our flag flying high here at home. Few Americans are aware of the intense and skeptical scrutiny to which our domestic affairs are subjected by the outside world, and of the beneficial effect produced on both our friends and our enemies by evidences that we are seriously tackling the problems of our own society.

This is not just a question of material prosperity. What the outside world is more eager to know is whether we are capable of coping with the sociological and spiritual problems placed upon us by all this abundance. It is eager to know whether we are going to be able to retain, in a mechanized environment, the individuality, the emotional tone and the civic vigor of earlier generations of Americans. Naturally, a nation cannot rely on social and spiritual progress for safety, any more than it can rely on inefficiveness. But the connection between these things is closer than most of us would think. We will not convince others, or perhaps even ourselves, that we are protecting something precious unless we cultivate that something as assiduously as we prepare to defend it. To make sure that we can fully respect ourselves remains the best way to hold the respect of others.

Fourth, our security rests in continuing to act in a spirit of justice and good will toward others, which will make it possible for us to help a little toward bringing about a general attitude of peaceful cooperation in the world at large. It is here that the present possibilities of the United Nations come into their own.

We should not lose ourselves in [illegible] for changing human nature all over the planet. [illegible] should learn to view ourselves with a sense of pro[illegible] and Christian humility before the enormous complexity of the world in which it has been given us to live.

If we do these things, we should be able to go about our international business with our heads high and our eyes

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clear, untroubled either by overweening ambitions or by panicky anxieties, accepting the risks which are the inevitable concomitant of all real human progress, and keeping our gaze fixed confidently on the distant goals which it is every man's duty always to move toward even though they may never be entirely reached. We will then be doing the best we can in a complex and problematical world. No nation can do more than that.

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